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FORCE ASYMMETRY IN LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT
OR
HOW TO BEAT THE ENEMY AT HIS OWN GAME (U)

by

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

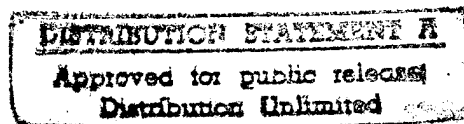
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15. Abstract: The U.S. military will most likely be involved in numerous MOOTW and low intensity conflicts in the coming years. The operational commander will have to design an operational plan to counter smaller, weaker forces (relative to U.S. power) that possess the military and political advantage of fighting in their country, among their own people. To operate successfully, the weaker force will must subscribe to specific principles of war that have been successfully used by insurgents guerrillas in many low intensity conflicts. This paper analyzes these principles and proposes an operational strategy for the operational commander to counter the unique, deadly strategy of the insurgent. The Boer War between Great Britain and the South Africa republics of 1899-1902 and the Insurgent movement in China led by Mao Tse-Tung are used as examples of successful insurgent movements.	

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"Wars in every period have independent forms and independent conditions, and, therefore every period must have its independent theory of war" - Clausewitz

"Political power comes out of the barrel of a gun"
- Mao Tse-Tung

Although the above quotes were made many years ago, long before the end of the Cold War and ensuing confusion of extreme ethnic and nationalistic expression, they are no less relevant today, particularly to the United States, the only political and military hegemonic power capable of leading the world into the twenty-first century. We need look no further than current White House doctrine for a vision of potential conflicts the United States will face in the coming years. President Clinton has said, "The dangers we face today are more diverse. Ethnic conflict is spreading and rogue states pose a serious danger to regional stability in many corners of the globe" and "Our global interest and our historical ideals impel us to oppose those who would endanger the survival or well-being of their peaceful neighbors"¹ (emphasis added). Clearly, it appears the current administration is intent on remaining engaged in international affairs in a political, economic, and military sense. And despite the current political rhetoric of the loyal republican opposition, it is highly unlikely that the United States will embrace isolationism and retreat from the world stage anytime soon. The abundance of geopolitical uncertainties in the post-Cold War coupled with the inevitable associated limited military

¹ The White House, A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (Washington: 1995), i-ii.

engagements, will present the U.S. military commanders with an extraordinary perplexing dilemma: How to prepare a large, powerful, technologically superior force, trained to fight and win with extreme violence, to engage an enemy who are technology limited and fewer in number, yet posses a strong commitment to their cause and the freedom of movement to wage a devastating and effective political and military campaign of resistance? Simply put, how will the United States operational commander approach the dilemma of force asymmetry? This is particularly problematic as this is exactly the scenario the United States military will face in the myriad of low intensity conflicts they will be expected to "fight and win" as emerging nation-states struggle in the post-Cold War confusion.

The asymmetry in force capabilities described above presents a significant problem for the operational commander in planning for a low intensity conflict. What use are secretive nuclear submarines, Aegis cruisers, or stealth bomber technology when the enemy is a relatively small, highly mobile force operating in a politically sensitive environment who has controlled access to the international media. There is obvious potential for military frustration and national embarrassment. The clear distinction between strategic and operational objectives becomes blurred. Every operational decision must be made in the context of political impact. But as J.W. Klingamen states, "The central theme dominating low-intensity conflicts is revolutionary conflict and insurgency...a theme that overshadows all other

aspects of the low-intensity conflict realm."² If this is true, and I believe it is, the operational commander must attempt to understand the strategies and principles to which his enemy, the revolutionaries and insurgents, subscribe. But exactly what principles of war do insurgents subscribe to? Joint Publications provide U.S. commanders with a convenient checklist of Principles of War³ and Principles of MOOTW.⁴ It seems prudent, however, to ask if insurgents or revolutionary commanders have a similar, convenient list of principles. And if they do, what are they? And finally, how best can an operational commander respond or attack to counter the principles used by his enemy. It seems presumptuous (and wrong) to assume the insurgent commander or "war lord" of a smaller and weaker force opposing overwhelming U.S. firepower will think and plan as we do. However, if we can gain insight into his thought process, determine his priorities, then we can more efficiently plan our operation against him. As BGen S.B. Griffith says in his introduction to Mao's On Guerilla Warfare, "A revolutionary war is never confined within the bounds of military action."⁵ This equally applies to many low intensity

² Jerome W. Klingaman, ed., U.S. Policy and Strategic Planning for Low Intensity Conflict, (Maxwell Air Force Base AL: Air University Press, 1988), 167.

³ U.S. Joint Publication Agency, Doctrine for Joint Operations - Joint Pub 3-0, (Washington: 1995), II-1.

⁴ U.S. Joint Publication Agency, Doctrine for Joint Operations - Joint Pub 3-07, (Washington: 1995), II-1.

⁵ Samuel B. Griffith, BGen, USMC (Ret), Introduction to Mao Tse-Tung On Guerilla Warfare (New York: Frederick Praeger: 1961),

conflict situation. The prudent operational commander understands this and attempts to determine where "the bounds" of his adversary are.

Force asymmetry is certainly not a recent phenomena. Fortunately, history abounds with examples of low-intensity conflicts between asymmetrical forces. As we shall see, it is often the stronger, more powerful force that leaves the battle field to the smaller weaker force primarily due to a failure to understand the operational strategy of the smaller force. I will now examine two classic examples of low-intensity conflicts between asymmetrical forces, analyze the principles of war used by the smaller insurgent force and then propose alternatives to counter the insurgent's operational strategies.

For the United States, our experience in Viet-Nam and Somalia immediately come to mind as examples of the dilemma of force asymmetry. However the first half of this century provides two classic examples which, had they been studied closely, might have altered the outcome of our bad experiences in Viet-Nam and Somalia. The first case is the Boer War, or South African War, of 1899-1902 between Great Britain and two small, primarily white republics in southern Africa. The second will be the classic insurgency movement of Mao Tse-Tung against the nationalist Chinese government of Chiang Kai-Shek and the invading Japanese army in the 1930's. Both of these conflicts were low intensity in nature and demonstrated the capability of "militarily feeble

but resolute people to defy a world power."⁶

The Boer War was a clash between Great Britain, a military superpower, and the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, two small, rural, deeply religious republics inhabited by mostly Dutch and German descendants who had lived in southern Africa for over 250 years. The British colony of South Africa, in 1899, consisted only of two areas along the east and west coast of the area today known as South Africa. The center of the country was not yet claimed by the British. The colony had been under British rule for some time, and was populated by a white ruling minority (the Boers) who, over time, had enslaved the much larger black African population. Britain had emancipated the black slaves in 1833, greatly angering the Boers, as it removed the Boer's "customary control over labor."⁷ The frustrated Boer population, in order to escape the interference of the British government, began to migrate east and west towards the center of the country to an area that would later encompass the republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. In the two new Boer republics, the Boers again instituted slavery and returned to their previous agrarian lifestyle, free from British interference. All would have remained quiet between the British and the Boers were it not for the discovery in the Transvaal of

⁶ Bevin Alexander, The Future of Warfare, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 1995), 86.

⁷ Leanord Thompson, A History of South Africa, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 140.

what would become (to this day) the richest gold and diamond fields in the world. Simply put, the British, who now wanted control of the gold, would have to annex the Boer republics to capitalize on the newly discovered resources. Needless to say, the Boers, who wanted to be left alone, were very resistant to Britain's new claim to their republics.⁸ As it was, a confrontation was inevitable, and indeed, the conflict began in October, 1899.

The powerful British army was frustrated from the beginning. Perhaps Sir Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner and Governor of the Cape, summarized it best when he said "An army can deal with an army, but, as we have just seen, it is almost helpless against small, scattered, and highly mobile commandos, and unless there is some obstacle in their way, 500 men can ride through the colony...with 5000 riding ineffectually after them."⁹ From the beginning, the Boers were unable to challenge the "immensely superior firepower of the British army."¹⁰ The British could concentrate significant firepower, primarily artillery, in conventional battles and win handedly. But the Boers did not play by the "old rules." The Boers effectively adapted their operational strategy and begin to use their critical strengths to attack the critical weakness of the more

⁸ Ibid, 141.

⁹ G.H.L. Le May, British Supremacy in South Africa, (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1965), 115.

¹⁰ Alexander, 89.

powerful British force. The Boers's strengths were domestic support, excellent intelligence, rapid mobility, and well trained, skillful commandos. As for the British, their weakness was the antagonism of the Boer people, their inability to counter Boer mobility, and remarkably vulnerable supply lines.¹¹ All the artillery in the world would not have made a difference. The British public was shocked that only 15,000 Boers could evade and frustrate a powerful British force in excess of 250,000 well trained professional soldiers.¹² The Boers waged a classic low intensity conflict against a more powerful conventional force resulting in a military stalemate that led to terms of peace that were favorable to the smaller, weaker Boer force. The Boers never defeated the British on the battlefield, but by maintaining an army-in-being, they frustrated the British military leading to erosion of popular support for the campaign in England. With no clear victor, a truce was signed in 1902. Five years after the conflict, the two Boer republics were independent, with black African slaves, and full recognition of the British government - everything the Boers fought for. Of special note were the desperate (and fateful) actions taken by the British towards the end of the conflict to try to defeat the elusive Boer commando. The British military began to force Boer women and children into concentration camps for "their protection" resulting in the death

¹¹ Edgar Holt, The Boer War, (London: Putnam, 1958), 271-281.

¹² Alexander, 111.

of thousands as the conditions in the camps were extremely unsanitary. This only angered the Boer forces and completely horrified the British populace who were already growing tired of the expensive, protracted conflict.¹³ The key mistake of the British military was viewing the conflict from a pure military perspective. A depressed Sir Alfred Milner (a civilian), when asked about his influence with the British military operating in his colony, said "As a matter of fact, there is nothing I can think more dangerous than a civilian mixing himself up in matters military...but what is purely military in (South Africa)? Every military movement is so dependent upon political conditions and forecasts, that there can be no sound strategy without taking these into account."¹⁴ The Boer war is a textbook example of a powerful military force failing to understand the complexities of force asymmetry and the principles under which a smaller, weaker force is operating, and consequently, failing to meet their objectives.

The second example also exemplifies the complexities of force asymmetry - Mao Tse-Tung's struggle against the Japanese and Chinese nationals from 1929-1949. The principles adopted by Mao remain valid and can be implemented by any belligerent in a low-intensity conflict. Mao subscribed to the fifth century B.C. philosophy of Sun Tzu, who said, "The way to avoid what is strong

¹³ Holt, 265-271.

¹⁴ Le May, 45-46.

is to strike what is weak."¹⁵ Mao believed the operational commander should subscribe to speed, surprise, and deception. He would say, before attack "create an uproar in the East, strike in the West."¹⁶ These were exactly the principles of war Mao followed in the 1930s as he continually frustrated and ultimately defeated the Chinese nationalist and invading Japanese. Although superior in size and firepower, neither force adjusted their conventional, unsuccessful effort to engage Mao's forces "head-on" in battle. Mao's operational strategy to "defend nothing" was congruent with his views that, "there is nothing comparable to the fixed passive defense that characterizes orthodox war" as well as "there is in guerilla warfare no such thing as a decisive battle."¹⁷ Using these operational concepts, including the view that the enemy has "no front, no rear, but all flanks," Mao successfully defeated isolated groups of his more powerful foe by using highly mobile forces to attack supply lines and quickly strike and run away - defending nothing. The Japanese were eventually defeated and, in 1949, Chaing Kai-Shek retreated to Taiwan.

During the period of conflict, Mao published his classic study on guerilla warfare articulating how a smaller, poorly

¹⁵ Sun Tzu, The Art of War, (New York: Delacorte Press: 1984), 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷ Mao Tse Tung, On Guerilla Warfare, (New York: F. Praeger: 1961), 52.

equipped force can overcome force asymmetry and defeat a more powerful, foreign invader. It is fortunate that Mao published his operational design for guerilla warfare, for it provides a fascinating insight of how potential adversaries of the United States might plan to conduct operations in future low-intensity conflicts. Formidable, high-tech U.S. forces will certainly have the firepower advantage in unrestricted, conventional battle, but that is not likely where we will be challenged. Overwhelming force will provide little advantage. An example of the opposite thinking of traditional soldiers occurred after the Viet-Nam war. Col Harry Summers, an Army War college instructor told a North Vietnamese Colonel: "You never defeated us on the battlefield." To which his former enemy replied: "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."¹⁸ Such is the world in which our future operational commanders must anticipate and plan.

We will now look specifically at the principles of war to which the Boer commanders and Mao subscribed, and then discuss what an opposing operational commander of a more powerful force might do to counter their strategy.

Mao believes the commander of the weaker force must 1) Preserve himself and annihilate the enemy, 2) Establish Base Areas, 3) Mobilize the Masses, 4) Seek outside support, and 5) Unify the Effort.¹⁹ (J.J. McCuen includes initiative,

¹⁸ Alexander, 146.

¹⁹ John W. McCuen, The Art of Counter-Revolutionary Warfare, (London: Faber & Faber: 1966), 73.

intelligence, mobility, and surprise as subsets of the five identified by Mao.) In some sense, these might be classified "objectives" rather than "principles." But because Mao believes these are universal in nature and critical to every engagement, they become principles to be followed rather than simply objectives of a particular campaign. These are the five operational principles that are necessary if a smaller force is to overcome force asymmetry and defeat a stronger invading or occupying force. Certainly the Boers of South Africa and Mao effectively executed operations that followed each of these principles. Both effectively used mobility as a means of self-preservation and as a force multiplier to harass the stronger force. Neither annihilated the enemy in a physical sense, but both were in complete control of their respective territory immediately or shortly after conflict termination. Both established strategic bases (operational infrastructure network) including large areas of interconnecting civilian populations to support the movement of the mobile insurgents. Support of the people or masses is critical to overcoming force asymmetry. The British attempted to counter this principle by placing Boer civilians in concentration camps. This only proved to be a short operational success and a longer term strategic disaster.

Both the Boers and Mao managed to mobilize the masses in support of their efforts. This is a very difficult principle for a larger occupying force to overcome. Short of destroying the civilian population, there is little the operational commander

can do to counter this phenomena once the masses have been mobilized against him. It is interesting to note that one of Mao's "People's Battalions" with 440 members would have ten or more public relations specialists attached. This demonstrates Mao's keen appreciation for controlling war-time public opinion.²⁰

Obtaining "outside support" is also critical to the success of a weaker force. Even if the support is only the sympathy of other nations, it provides the weaker force the force-multiplier of legitimacy among world states and conversely erodes support on the home-front of the more powerful force.

Lastly, Mao tells us nothing is possible without unity of effort. Every soldier of the weaker force must be involved in the political, economic, military, and educational preparation for conflict. Politicalization of the soldier is crucial. Ironically, the United States tries to separate the soldier from politics. Mao tried to turn every soldier into a politician.

This brings us to the most daunting challenge - how should an operational commander counter a smaller force that has successfully implemented or building towards the accomplishment of the five principles. The good news is that the U.S. commanders need not throw out the established principles of war provided in the joint Publications. To the contrary, the planning staff should focus on the specific principles that will

²⁰ Mao Tse-Tung, Appendix, Table-2.

best counter the principles of the smaller force. For example, the principle of security, surprise, and maneuver are combined with restraint and perseverance to counter the enemy's high mobility and his anticipated attacks on rear and flank positions. Carefully crafting the legitimacy of the operation with the National Command Authority would help counter the enemy's reliance on mobilizing the masses and his need to obtain outside support.²¹

The commander of the larger force must obtain sufficient intelligence to help him determine to what extent the smaller force has successfully established the five key principles. It is critical for the stronger force to determine to what extent the weaker force has organized. Have the masses or populace pledged allegiance to them? Have they already established a support base? And if so, how extensive is it? If support for the weaker force is not yet extensive, the operational commander of the stronger force must plan to move quickly and capitalize on this temporary weakness. He must include in his plan specific objectives and resources to prevent the local population from throwing their support to the smaller force. The operational plan should include branches to deny the enemy the leverage of the principles and objectives he has yet to obtain. The earlier the stronger force intervenes in the weaker forces attempts to establish his principles and objectives, the more likely it is

²¹ McCuen, 73.

that the stronger force will succeed.

It is important at this point to add a new, but critical concept that the operational commander of the larger force must consider if he is to plan effectively and achieve his objective. As discussed earlier, the smaller force is as much a political foe as he is a military foe. Therefore the military commander of the larger force must include in his operational plan a way to counter the political strengths of the smaller force. The operational commander of the stronger force must provide for the integrated synchronization of military and diplomatic initiatives to effectively counter the efforts of the smaller force to win the support of the masses and obtain outside support. J.W. Klingaman recognizes that "pulling together all the capabilities needed to implement reform, to eliminate the insurgent infrastructure (is achieved by) combining all instruments of national power into a single, integrated internal defense and development program made up of both civilian and military elements."²² Imagine the outcome of the Boer war if the British had chosen to provide food and care for the Boer families while isolating the Boer insurgents instead of hopelessly chasing the Boer forces while putting their families in unsanitary concentration camps! Or if the Japanese had chosen to befriend the Chinese peasants thus taking away the base infrastructure Mao had developed. It is important to remember that the

²² Klingaman, 174.

synchronization of the military-civilian effort is extremely important if the effort is to succeed. Do not teach the farmer how to plant crops while your military is placing mines in his fields.

If the weaker force has already matured and has actively achieved his five objectives of insurgent warfare, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, for the commander of the stronger force to defeat the smaller force, regardless of the power available to the larger force. In such an instance, it is probably best not to intervene militarily in the region or state. However, if the operational commander can accurately determine to what extent the smaller force has matured vis-a-vis Mao's five principles of war, and effectively integrate military and civilian objectives into his plan, he is in a position to reverse, or turn the tables on the smaller force and achieve not only his military, but his political objectives as well.²³

CONCLUSION

Asymmetry in force structure demands that both the stronger and weaker operational commanders develop alternative operational strategies in conducting low-intensity warfare. Mao Tse-Tung has provided the classic architecture of a masterful process for a smaller, weaker force to use in preparing to fight a larger, stronger force. Although they preceded Mao, the Boer commanders in the Boer War executed a strategy against the invading British

²³ McCuen, 85.

that Mao could have used as his blueprint for his later treatise on guerilla warfare (though there is no indication that he did). The smaller force must be highly mobile, supported by the people, and have a mature, developed base infrastructure to support the quick erratic movements necessary for his force protection. The smaller force defends nothing, has no front or rear, no real lines of logistical support for his support is everywhere. To survive, the smaller force must not engage in decisive battles forces - only battles of attrition.

The larger force has a daunting task if the smaller force has had time to mature and develop his theater of operations. However, if the larger force can intervene earlier, before the smaller force matures, and execute an operational plan that denies the smaller force the principles and objectives necessary for his survival, then it is possible for the larger force to achieve their objectives. The larger force must specifically target the unfulfilled objective of the smaller force. And of course the force multiplier is the ability of the larger force to successfully integrate and synchronize political and civilian efforts into his operational plan.

These are complex issues for the operational commander assigned the mission of operating in the vicinity of a smaller and weaker belligerent force. But the difference between achieving his objectives and failure might lie in being able to make the correct choice between expediting more tanks and APCs into theater or more host-country linguists and medicine for the

children of the "belligerent" populace. There is no single answer, even for the military commander. The answer lies in the ability of the operational commander to determine just how deeply rooted and mature the smaller, insurgent force has become. The answer is that we must beat the insurgent at his own game, fully recognizing that in asymmetrical conflicts, the game is rarely about pure military firepower. When the enemy chooses to defend nothing, the answer is not easy.

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